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## Comments on George F. Gaumer and the provenance of a Giant Kingbird *Tyrannus cubensis* specimen from Mexico

by P. William Smith

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The Giant Kingbird *Tyrannus cubensis* is currently considered a rare and endangered species endemic to Cuba (Collar *et al.* 1994, AOU 1998). In the 19<sup>th</sup> century it may have been commoner and more widespread. Prior to 1890 several specimens were collected in the southern Bahama islands (summarized by Buden 1987), and one was claimed for Isla Mujeres, off the eastern coast of the Yucatán Peninsula, Mexico, by

Salvin (1889) and other contemporaneous authors. The basis of the latter record is a specimen in The Natural History Museum, Tring, UK (BMNH 1888.1.1.1691) dated 25 February 1886, attributed to George F. Gaumer. This record has recently been considered “questionable” (e.g. AOU 1998).

George F. Gaumer (1850–1929) was an American physician/naturalist, originally from Kansas, who resided primarily in the State of Yucatán, Mexico, during the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries (Parkes 1970). According to his letters on file in the zoology library of The Natural History Museum, London, which I recently reviewed, Gaumer was commissioned in late 1885 by Osbert Salvin and Frederick Godman to undertake a collecting expedition to the Bay Islands of Honduras. Gaumer, who then practised medicine near Mérida, proposed to stop en route at various Mexican islands, particularly Holbox and Mujeres, from which little material had been collected previously. His party, including Gaumer’s wife and others, departed in November 1885 and was shortly beset by disease. They lingered on Isla Mujeres in December 1885, before heading for Isla Cozumel, where Gaumer had collected earlier in 1885 for Salvin and Godman, and where he had previously established a base. Gaumer hoped that his party could recuperate there before continuing.

After returning to Isla Mujeres briefly in February 1886, his group continued on to Roatán in the Bay Islands, despite the fact that illness continued to dog them. Evidently, Gaumer had to spend more time during this period tending to himself and others than directly in collecting, although he did prepare the specimens, which included insects and plants as well as birds, brought to him by members of his party and others. In July 1886, he dispatched a batch of material to Salvin which included over 700 birds, 142 from Isla Mujeres. The birds each contained a tag rubber-stamped with Gaumer’s name, and the island and month where the specimen was collected or received and then prepared. A serial number, which evidently cross-referenced a separately enclosed log of the material, was also hand-written on the tags. Gaumer asked Salvin to identify the material item-by-item and offered more detailed notes as needed. Later, Gaumer dispatched additional material in a similar fashion. He remained based in the Bay Islands until 1887, and in 1888 he wrote to Salvin from Mexico thanking him for finally responding with identifications of the specimens he had sent.

Salvin and Godman attached their own tags to each avian specimen, preprinted with the stamped information from Gaumer’s tags. For the specimens from Isla Mujeres, the date on the new tags was preprinted “December 1885” regardless of whether Gaumer’s tags were stamped “December” (1885, the vast majority) or “February” (1886, a minority). This discrepancy still remains on the tags of all February specimens that I examined, where Gaumer’s tag also remains attached, but for one. The single exception to this pattern that I noted involves the specimen of *Tyrannus cubensis* (then *T. magnirostris*) mentioned above, which was accessioned in the Museum’s catalogue among a large batch of Gaumer’s material. This specimen’s tags differ from the others in that “December” is crossed out on Salvin and Godman’s tag, replaced by “Feb. 25, 1886”, and “25, iris brown” is hand-written after Gaumer’s “February” stamp. I found none of Gaumer’s other tags that still remain from that expedition so annotated.

Evidently, someone then recognized the significance of this particular specimen. That person is unlikely to have been Gaumer, whose correspondence shows little expertise in identification or avifaunal matters. Although Gaumer did collect in Cuba in the late 1870's for A. Boucard, many of the specimens he secured there are now also in The Natural History Museum, Tring, and show relatively primitive preparation skills. They contain no examples of *T. cubensis*. This specimen's significance was most likely recognised by Salvin, Godman, or one of their associates after its arrival in England, the additional information being taken from Gaumer's log or notes. Salvin's (1889) paper about Gaumer's collection states the date (Feb. 25, 1886), as well as the fact that the species is generally considered confined to Cuba, showing that the specimen's importance was known at least shortly after its arrival at the museum.

This record of *T. cubensis* for Mexico stood essentially unquestioned until Howell & Webb (1995) placed it in their hypothetical category, apparently based on Gaumer's reputation among North American museum curators for careless and sloppy labelling (Parkes 1970). This is also presumably the basis for its recent questioning by AOU (1998), for they had not done so previously (AOU 1983). Gaumer's questionable reputation may have originated from remarks by Paynter (1955), who doubted the location of a number of Gaumer's specimens, particularly those of the Plain Chachalaca *Ortalis vetula* from the various Mexican islands to which Gaumer attributed them. Yet, Paynter (1955) acknowledged that some of Gaumer's unexpected locations had been confirmed by himself or other collectors (e.g. Black-throated Blue Warbler *Dendroica caerulescens*), and that some of Paynter's own specimens (e.g. Ochre-bellied Flycatcher *Mionectes oleagineus* then *Pipromorpha oleaginea*) would not stand up to the level of scrutiny he applied to Gaumer's. Inasmuch as Gaumer acknowledges in his correspondence that on this trip he prepared specimens brought to him by others, it seems reasonable to believe that some of them may have come from nearby locations.

Although I failed to locate Gaumer's log or his more detailed notes at The Natural History Museum, no good reason seems to exist to doubt the overall provenance of this specimen. If Gaumer's 1885-6 collection contained other specimens of apparent Cuban origin, one might have more reason to be suspicious. One cannot be certain, however, that 1888.1.1.1691 was secured on Isla Mujeres itself rather than at some nearby place. Gaumer acknowledged that he did not collect many of his specimens himself during that period, and the month and location on his tags seem to reflect when and where the specimen was received and prepared, not necessarily collected. It seems improbable, however, that only this particular specimen would have been brought across the Yucatán Channel from Cuba, some 200 km to the northeast, in an unprepared state. Collectively, Gaumer's letters suggest a man of integrity and honourable intentions, so deliberate fakery seems far-fetched. Furthermore, as Salvin (1889) recognized, *T. cubensis* by then had established a pattern of appearing in the southern Bahamas at least during the winter months (Buden 1987). Thus a record at that season directly across the Yucatán Channel from the Cuban mainland does not strain credulity.



Whilst history may not be kind to Gaumer because of the apparent lack of detail and precision on some of his labels (Parkes 1970), I believe that this record should stand as credible evidence of the Giant Kingbird's once-wider range, to include the North American continent, even if the precise location where this particular specimen was taken is considered somewhat uncertain. Given the species' modern rarity (Collar *et al.* 1994), it is unlikely to be known whether the Giant Kingbird formerly had a wider breeding range, or merely wandered beyond Cuba during the non-breeding season.

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## **The Fawn-breasted Brilliant *Heliodoxa rubinoides*, a hummingbird species new to Bolivia**

*by Swen C. Renner & Karl-L. Schuchmann*

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The Fawn-breasted Brilliant *Heliodoxa rubinoides* is a polytypic medium-sized hummingbird (length 11-13 cm, body mass *c.* 7-10 g) without marked sexual dimorphism. It is widespread from the Andes of Colombia to Ecuador and Peru (Fig.1).